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Altering Representations: An analysis of Afro-Latin@s in Visual Media

As of the year 2010 when the last census was conducted, there were just under 50,500,000 Latin@s[1] living in the United States. This number increased from the previous decade by a mind-blowing 43%, ultimately indicating that Latin@s constitute 16.3% of the total population of the United States (Ennis). These numbers give way to a significant change that is occurring within popular culture in the US. Latin traditions, music, food, and religious practices are making their way into mainstream culture at an unprecedented rate, giving Latin@s throughout the United States a much larger communal network, and much more visibility in the media. This, however, gives rise to three major problems regarding how Latin@s fit into our understanding of race in the United States. First, the black/white binary that has predominated our understanding of race is insufficient. It does not allow for other categories, such as Latin@s, to exist. Secondly, those categories that we do recognize are understood as mutually exclusive. One cannot be both black and Latin@, but rather *part* black and part Latin@. Finally, that mutual exclusivity among categories renders subgroups within each category invisible. This paper will bring those problems to light, begin to explain why they exist, and further examine some of their consequences. Before we examine those problems, however, we must first address another issue.

[1] I use the term Latin@ in my paper for the sake of consistency. Another term, "Hispanic," is often used to describe the same population, but the choice in terminology is often a matter of preference. Some people prefer the term Hispanic, while others reject that term for political reasons. Those people typically use the term "Latino" or "Latina." The ampersand (@) is often used to show gender inclusion (Latin@), as Latino refers to a male and Latina refers to a woman. For gender-neutral terms such as "tradition" or "music," I use "Latin."

In the United States, race and ethnicity are two terms that have become colloquially interchangeable. I point this out because, as I have come to understand them within today's realm of scholarship, they are not. Race refers to the socially constructed categorization of people based on shared physical or biological characteristics, such as skin color for example. Ethnicity, on the other hand, is based on shared experiences, religious practices, cultural practices, or ways of living. It is still socially constructed and it is still used to categorize people. The two seem distinct, but they are often incorrectly used interchangeably. This has led to a more flexible understanding of what the terms represent. Keeping this in mind, understand that my use of terms such as Latin or Latin@ will often blur those boundaries.

In his essay, *The Black/White Binary Paradigm of Race: The "Normal Science" of American Racial Thought,* Latino writer Juan F. Perea draws attention to our understanding of race in the United States. His claim, which is supported with a good deal of evidence, is that in the United States we have room for only two opposing racial categories: black and white. He asserts that until now, nearly all discourse on race used that binary model. That discourse placed everything into one of those two categories, and if something did not quite fit into either, it became invisible. A quote from his essay says it well:

> American society has no social technique for handling partly colored races. We have a place for the Negro and a place for the white man: the Mexican (or more generally, Latino) is not a Negro, and the white man refuses him an equal status" (Perea, 127).

We find evidence of this in *A Class Apart,* a documentary that followed the Supreme Court Case, Hernandez vs. Texas. The case argued against Jim Crow-style segregation for Mexican Americans, and it forced the United States to recognize that the law, as written until that point, concerned only blacks and whites, leaving large populations such as Latin@s unaccounted for.

This is our initial problem: the black/white binary still predominates our understanding of race in the United States today, even though it is constantly being disrupted. For example, with the growing Latin-American population, a third variable is being thrown into the equation of race, which does not fit entirely into our concepts of white or black. Because of this, scholars like Joseph Contreras support the recognition of a third category, noting that Latin@s suffer an immeasurable amount of discrimination and have a unique history, which is distinct from both whites and blacks. Thus, they should be unique in how they are identified, and Latin@ emerges as a third classification.

Latin@ becomes a category of its own, in this case, one of race. The binary is disrupted, and the concept of race is instead split into multiple categories. At this point, our second problem is brought to light: racial categories are mutually exclusive, just as they were in the binary model. Our understanding of race still forces someone to be, for example, either black or Latin@. We see this come to life in a 2011 episode of MTV's documentary series, *True Life*. In this episode we meet a young bi-racial girl with a black father and a white mother named Danielle. Disconnected from and ashamed of her African-American roots, however, she has been "passing" as Costa Rican to her high school friends. Because of her dark brown skin and curly hair, she would typically be identified as black in the United States. However, because people accept her heritage as Latin American, she is perceived as *not* black. When one friend asked her if she had "any kind of black in [her]," she responded with, "No. I'm white and Costa Rican" (Forhan). This example shows that we are able to recognize miscegenation; someone can be *part* of each concrete identity, but not fully more than one. In the end they are each understood as mutually exclusive. That perceived exclusivity leads into our third problem: our

concept of each category as both concrete and exclusive makes it impossible to recognize the existence other categories like Afro-Latin@s.

Afro-Latin@s are those Latin Americans with black African ancestry. For a long time in the United States, the existence of Afro-Latin@s has been obscured. This is in part due to the exclusivity of racial identity discussed above: if someone looks black, (s)he is black, and only black; if someone does not, (s)he must be something else. To further understand this invisibility, however, we turn to our greatest source of dissemination in today's fast-paced and commercialized society: visual media.

Various channels of visual media, mainly television and film, have had a history of influencing ideologies within a culture. Sut Jhally makes a good point in his essay, *Image-based Culture: Advertising and Popular Culture*: he uses the example of gender identity to demonstrate the power of visual media. What we understand as typically "male" and "female" has been influenced by numerous advertisements, sitcom personalities, and movie characters. There is nothing biologically female about owning a purse. In the same respect, there is nothing incredibly masculine about drinking milk out of the carton. Yet visual media denotes a gendered label to both of these actions. The same idea can be applied to racial and ethnic concepts. Visual media tells us, or shows us rather, how a white girl dresses, how a black man speaks, and what a Latin@ looks like. When repeated, such images create ideologies, and they truly begin to shape our understanding of what Latin@s, for example, look like.

In American television and film over the last 25 years, the images of Latin@s that have been disseminated throughout the viewing audience are nearly homogenous. Production companies consistently cast lighter brown-skinned actors and actresses to fill the roles of Latin@s, underrepresenting the diversity that exists within the Latin@ community. These actors

include Jennifer Lopez, who has starred in movies like *Mi Familia* and *Selena*; Constance Marie, who starred opposite George Lopez in his eponymous hit series; and Benjamin Pratt. When the phenotype of these actors (i.e. light brown skin) is repeated time and time again, it assures the audience that all Hispanics look similar and are somewhere in between black and white.

In the same way that the visual media we consume shapes our knowledge through reoccurring images, it also has the power to shape our ignorance by failing to provide accurate images. This is the case with Afro-Latin@s. US television and film fails to represent Afro-Latin@s in mainstream mediums. In fact, those Afro-Latin actors and actresses who *are* employed end up playing African American characters. Tatyana Ali, for example, is Afro-Panamanian. She played Ashley Banks, an African-American teen, on *The Fresh Prince of Bellaire* for 7 years. However, she has never played the role of a Latina. Faizon Love is an actor born on the island of Cuba. He is known for smaller roles, such as Big Worm in *Friday* or Buddy's supervisor in *Elf*. Again, both of those characters are African-American.

This lack of representation for Afro-Latin@s through visual media has made them virtually non-existent to much of the United States. Otherwise, recent projects which seek only to expose the mere existence of Afro-Latin@s, like Henry Louis Gates, Jr's *Black in Latin America*, would never exist. Naturally, this invisibility has had negative effects on the Afro-Latin@ community within the US. Yvette Modestin writes in her essay, *An Afro-Latina's Quest for Inclusion*, that she had always been proud of and understood her *negresa*[2]. She grew up in an area of Panama that was filled with positive images of Afro-Latin@s. However, she notes that she felt rejected by her peers in the United States. Latin@s write her off as black, ignoring the fact that she was raised in a Latin American country and speaks better Spanish than most of

[2] The word *negresa* translated literally means "blackness." It is a conceptual term which is defined by the individual, but it typically deals with those having genealogical roots to sub-Saharan Africa.

them. African Americans do not relate to her either, and all the while she looks at magazines like *Latina*, or turns on Telemundo, and does not identify with either because neither features anyone who looks remotely like her. She has a point.

One would think that if mainstream American visual media did a lack-luster job at representing the racial diversity of Latin@s, then television and film produced specifically for a Spanish-speaking audience would surely make up for it. In her comments above, however, Modestin suggests that they also fall short. Silvio Torres-Saillant explores this further in his essay, *Problematic Paradigms: Racial Diversity and Corporate Identity in the Latino Community*. He is interested in the intra-Latino prejudices that occur when media producers fail to challenge the homogenous representation of Latin@s in the United States. Advising the reader to be careful about leaving with the notion of one unified pan-ethnic Latin@ community, he draws attention to the discrepancies among Latin@s. From how well they are received as immigrants, to national identities, he points out clear differences among Latin@s in the United States. He pays close attention to the racial inequalities he sees. He humorously comments, "One could surmise that in an applicant's effort to land a job as a newscaster on a Spanish-speaking TV station or network, Scandinavian ancestry might be very helpful" (Torres-Sallant, 444). Of course, he is criticizing the absence of darker-skinned Latin@s on Spanish-speaking television. That visual homogeneity is exactly what he is warning us about. He believes it allows for and promotes racism within the Latin@ community. He goes on to point out that even in *telenovelas* (Spanish-language soap operas), dark-skinned actors almost always play the role of a maid or a gardener, or perhaps even a *curander@*[3] (445).

[3] *Curander@* is literally translated as "healer." Typically it is a member of the community who specializes in herbal, spiritual, and religious healing practices. The word can often carry negative connotations of crazy. Torres-Saillant's point is that darker skinned characters are exoticized or shown as atypical members of the community.

These sentiments are echoed in the documentary, "*A Negação Do Brasil*," or "*Denying Brazil,"* which follows the history of Afro-Latin@s in Brazilian television. The film recognizes that despite their presence on screen, black actors played the second-class roles of maids or butlers. They simply were not given lead roles. In fact, the filming of "A Cabana do Pai Tomás," a Brazilian *telenovela* based on the story of Uncle Tom's Cabin, turned up a huge pool of first-rate Afro-Brazilian actors and actresses, but the lead role was still given to a white man. The director then darkened his skin and put corks in his nose to widen his nostrils and cotton in his mouth to keep his speech "authentic" (Dixon). This is one of many examples in the documentary that illustrate the marginalization of black Brazilians.

It becomes clear from these examples that Afro-Latin@s are not getting proper representation in television or film. Despite this, we have seen more recently an emergence of Afro-Latin pride from within the black Latin@ community itself. One reason for this, I suggest, may be the exponential development of the internet in recent years. According to Scott London, the author of *Civic Networks: Building Community on the Net*, the internet allows users to create and maintain communities without being limited by a specific time and place; in other words users can connect with one another whenever they want, even if they are oceans apart. It improves human communication by "bringing together members of a community and promoting debate, deliberation and resolution of shared issues" (London). The internet is connecting people who otherwise might not have known each other to exist. Furthermore, it gives individuals the opportunity to create their own content—they are no longer forced to rely on media corporations for representation. For example, social media sites like MySpace and Facebook have given individuals a network on which to connect, while image-based sites like Tumblr and Pinterest reserve a space on the web to visually glorify whatever the user wants: in this case, Afro-

Latin@s. In fact, Amilcar Priestley discusses exactly how technology can help in preserving and making more visible Afrodescendant citizenship. Priestley is continuing the work of her father in the launch of a website called the Afro Latin@ Project. Her hopes are that the website becomes a place where Afrodescendants can preserve their oral histories, share research and data, and connect with one another in order to empower each other and take pride in their shared heritage.

In addition to the cyber movements taking place, there are also social movements continually mobilizing throughout the hemisphere. In Nicaragua, Afro-Latin@s are slowly demanding equal rights, following the lead of several other countries in Central and South America and the Caribbean. That mobilization is attributed to globalization: "[previously] isolated Latin American countries now have access to pop-cultural channels such as MTV and BET, which broadcast social messages worldwide" (Burch). This raises an interesting point. Perhaps television has been able to redeem itself. Despite the fact that Afro-Latin@s are not explicitly represented in sitcoms, newscasts, or other shows, perhaps the mobilization for equal rights is inspired by a more general Afrodescendant connection. Ejima Baker, author of *Can BET Make you Black? Remixing and Reshaping Latin@s on Black Entertainment Televsion*, seems to think so. She comments on BET's multi-racial catering, saying that it is recognizing that black Hispanics and African Americans share a common ancestry. She also points out the increasingly visible genre of *reggaeton* music on the show. BET is hiring Latin@ employees, and in the accumulation of all of these things, Baker suggests that the channel is challenging the way we define both blackness and *latinidad* in ways that no other ethnic- or race-based channel is doing. If she is right, her sentiments leave a promising undertone for more representation of Afro-Latin@s in the future of visual media.

Thus far, the Afro-Latin@ community has largely been ignored by visual media, both within the United States and on a broader hemispheric level. While Afro-Latin actors and actresses continue to play African Americans in English television and film, they fail to land significant roles in Spanish-language television all together. This makes them nearly invisible. As we utilize visual media more and more for the dissemination of information, the consequences of this invisibility have become severe. It has led to both an obliviousness of the mere existence of Afro-Latin@s, and the misrepresentation of the Latin population at large. In turn, Afro-Latin@s are often left ostracized by both their black and Latin@ peers. Fortunately some people are doing work to further our understanding of race through channels like BET and the exponentially-developing internet. Until we as a culture, however, can effectively continue to challenge that understanding by accurately portraying the diversity of Latin@s, those consequences will linger, and we will never achieve the ideal state of cultural harmony which so many seek to create.

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